A detailed illustration of a tiger standing on a large, grey rock in a dense forest. The tiger is orange with black stripes and is looking towards the left. The forest is filled with various types of trees, including deciduous trees with green leaves and evergreen trees in the background. The lighting suggests a bright day with some shadows on the ground and rock.

THIS IS A STORY
ABOUT A WILD LIFE.

UPORNY'S STORY

Captured after close encounters with humans, Uporny the tiger was rehabilitated and released, offering researchers an unprecedented look into the wild life of an elusive big cat.

Story and illustrations by **Matthew Twombly**

MARCH 2017
Khabarovsk Province, Russia



IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST, RESEARCHERS VENTURE INTO THE GURSKY WILDLIFE REFUGE WITH A LOCAL POLICEMAN.

THEY'VE COME TO INVESTIGATE A PROBLEM WITH AN AMUR TIGER.



FOR MOST OF THE PAST TWO YEARS, THEY'VE BEEN CLOSELY TRACKING THE TIGER THROUGH A GPS COLLAR.

NEARLY A MONTH AGO, THAT COLLAR STOPPED RECORDING ANY MOVEMENT, AND SHOWED A DRAMATIC DROP IN THE CAT'S BODY TEMPERATURE.

BLIZZARDS PREVENTED TRAVEL TO THE SITE UNTIL NOW.

TO FIND THE POINT OF THE LAST SIGNAL, THEY TRAVEL 5 MILES FROM THE NEAREST ROAD, EXPECTING THE WORST.



AND THEY'RE RIGHT.

BUT THIS IS NOT A STORY ABOUT THE DEATH OF A TIGER.



NOVEMBER 2014
VYAZEMSKOYE VILLAGE, RUSSIA

SEVERAL VILLAGERS SPOTTED A LONE, RAGGED MALE TIGER ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN—A RARE SIGHT, BUT NOT UNHEARD OF IN THE REGION.



VYAZEMSKOYE LIES AT THE WESTERN EDGE OF THE AMUR TIGER RANGE, WHERE ONLY ABOUT 540 WILD TIGERS REMAIN.

POACHING IS STILL THE BIGGEST THREAT TO THE AMUR TIGER. BUT HABITAT LOSS FROM LOGGING AND DEVELOPMENT ALSO HARMS THEIR POPULATION.



NATURALLY ELUSIVE, TIGERS TEND TO AVOID HUMANS. BUT WHEN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT CUTS INTO THE CATS' HABITAT, AND THEIR NATURAL PREY BECOMES SCARCE, CONFLICTS WITH HUMANS INCREASE.

ANY TIGER THAT WANDERS INTO A HUMAN SETTLEMENT BECOMES KNOWN AS A "CONFLICT TIGER."

AFTER TIGERS KILLED THREE DOGS IN VYAZEMSKOYE, LOCALS CONTACTED A GROUP THAT ADDRESSES HUMAN-TIGER CONFLICT, CREATED WITH THE HELP OF WWF-RUSSIA.



SEVERAL EXPERTS FROM THE GROUP CAME TO SNARE AND TRANQUILIZE THE CAT, A THREE-YEAR-OLD MALE IN POOR HEALTH.

HIS FUR WAS PALE, AND HIS RIBS WERE SHOWING. HE WAS SERIOUSLY EXHAUSTED.



THE TIGER WAS BROUGHT TO UTYOS REHABILITATION CENTER IN Khabarovsk PROVINCE, UNDER THE CARE OF PAVEL FOMENKO, SPECIES PROGRAM COORDINATOR FOR WWF-RUSSIA'S AMUR BRANCH.

THE GOVERNMENT-RUN FACILITY SPECIALIZES IN NURSING DISTRESSED TIGERS BACK TO HEALTH FOR THEIR EVENTUAL RELEASE INTO THE WILD.

IT'S HERE WHERE THE TIGER EARNED HIS NAME.

WHEN HE REFUSED TO LEAVE HIS TRANSPORT CAGE AND ENTER HIS NEW ENCLOSURE, THE UTUOS STAFF NAMED HIM *UPORNY*, WHICH IS RUSSIAN FOR "STUBBORN."



BUT UPORNY'S HEALTH IMPROVED QUICKLY, AND HE EAGERLY ACCEPTED FOOD.

EXPERTS FROM UTYSO MADE SURE TO KEEP CONTACT WITH UPORNY TO A MINIMUM, PRESERVING HIS WILD INSTINCTS FOR HIS EVENTUAL RELEASE.



A PLAN WAS FORMULATED TO STUDY UPORNY IN THE WILD.

HE WAS OUTFITTED WITH A RADIO COLLAR, WHICH MEASURED BODY TEMPERATURE AND LOCATION, SO HIS MOVEMENT THROUGH THE WILDERNESS COULD BE CLOSELY TRACKED.



THE COLLAR COULD BE DETACHED REMOTELY, OR WOULD DETACH AUTOMATICALLY WHEN IT RAN OUT OF BATTERY POWER.

ALONG WITH GATHERING DATA FROM THE COLLAR, RESEARCHERS WOULD TRACK UPORNY'S ACTIVITIES THROUGH OBSERVATIONS IN THE FIELD AND THE USE OF CAMERA TRAPS.



THE GOAL WAS TO LEARN HOW REHABILITATED TIGERS MOVE THROUGH THE REGION, WHERE THEY HUNT...



...AND HOW BEST TO KEEP THEIR POPULATION SAFE AND AWAY FROM HUMAN SETTLEMENTS.



AFTER 6 MONTHS AT UTYSO, UPORNY WAS HEALTHY AND READY TO BE RELEASED BACK INTO THE WILD.

MAY 28, 2015
BORDER OF ANYUISKY NATIONAL PARK

A SITE FOR RELEASE WAS
CHOSEN 124 MILES NORTHEAST
OF UTYSO REHABILITATION
CENTER, JUST OUTSIDE THE
PARK IN PRIME TIGER HABITAT.

A MALE TIGER AND A FEMALE
WITH A CUB WERE ALREADY
KNOWN TO BE IN THE AREA.

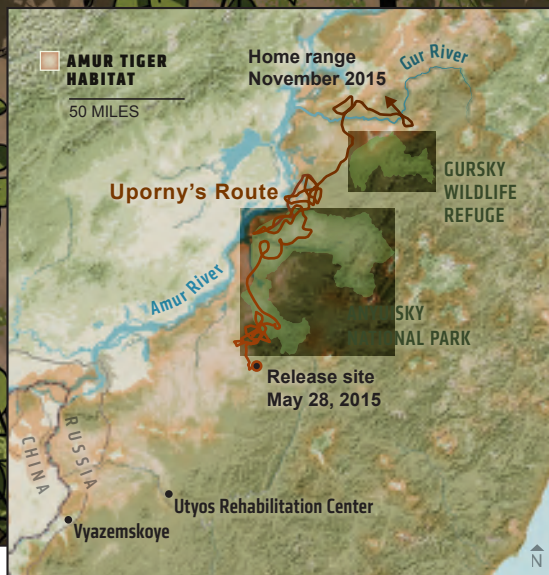
THE CAGE DOOR SLID OPEN. HEALTHY
AND ENERGETIC, UPORNY BOLTED FROM
THE CAGE WITHOUT LOOKING BACK.

UPORNY STILL HAD A LONG
JOURNEY AHEAD OF HIM.

HE WOULD NEED TO ESTABLISH A HOME
RANGE, FIND PREY, AND SURVIVE AGAINST
COMPETITORS IN THE FORESTS OF THE
RUSSIAN TAIGA—A HARSH ENVIRONMENT
WITH LONG, COLD WINTERS.

OVER THE NEXT FIVE MONTHS, THE
RESEARCHERS WAITED ANXIOUSLY FOR
UPORNY TO SETTLE AS HE STEADILY
ROAMED NORTHWARD IN SEARCH OF
A HOME RANGE.

BUT THE CAT SHOWED SIGNS THAT HE
WAS ADJUSTING WELL TO HIS NEW LIFE.





MARCH 2017

AND THAT EXTENSION OF
THEIR STUDY LED THEM HERE.

LIFE IN THE TAIGA IS
UNFORGIVING; ONLY THE
STRONGEST SURVIVE.



AN AUTOPSY IS CONDUCTED
TO REVEAL WHAT CAUSED
UPORNY'S DEATH.



ALL EVIDENCE POINTS
TOWARD A FIGHT WITH
ANOTHER LARGE PREDATOR,
ALMOST CERTAINLY
ANOTHER MALE TIGER.

FOR WWF-RUSSIA, UPORNY
BECAME A SYMBOL FOR THE
FREEDOM AND STRUGGLE OF
SURVIVAL IN THE WILD.

HE WAS CAPTURED,
REHABILITATED, AND FORCED
TO ADAPT ALL OVER AGAIN.

HE LIVED FREELY IN THE
FOREST FOR TWO YEARS,
IN THE HARSHTEST CONDITIONS,
WITH TEMPERATURES DROPPING
TO -40°F AND SNOW UP TO FIVE
FEET DEEP.

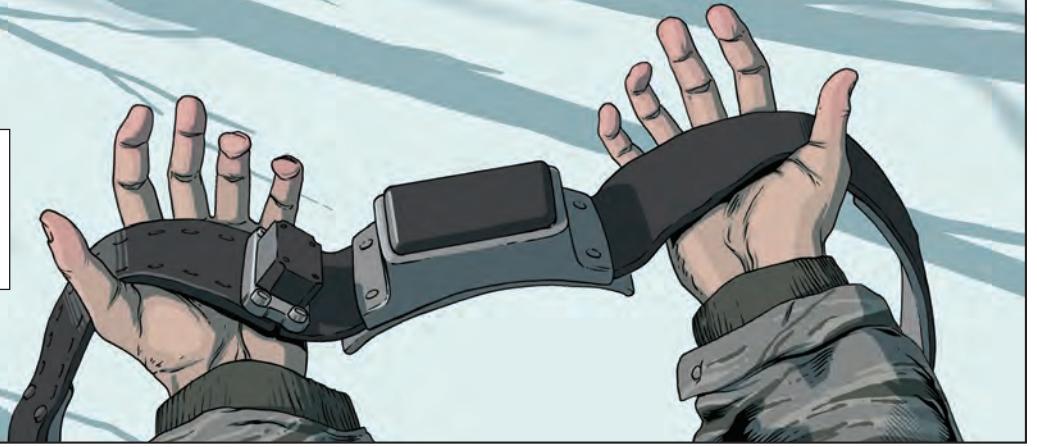
HE SUCCESSFULLY
KILLED LARGE PREY,
AND WE BELIEVE HE
FOUND A MATE.



UPORNY LIVED A TRULY WILD
LIFE, AND MET A WILD END.

"HE SHARED HIS LIFE
STORY WITH US,"
SAYS FOMENKO.

"WITH NATURAL CAUSES
LEADING TO SO MANY TIGER
DEATHS IN THIS REGION, IT'S
IMPORTANT TO KEEP THREATS
FROM HUMANS TO AN
ABSOLUTE MINIMUM."



THIS INTIMATE LOOK INTO THE
LIFE OF AN AMUR TIGER WILL
HELP US ENSURE THE SAFETY
OF THIS VULNERABLE SPECIES...



...AND FUTURE POPULATIONS
WILL OWE THEIR CONTINUED
SUCCESS IN PART TO ONE
STUBBORN TIGER.



Uporny's rehabilitation was the result of collaboration between Khabarovsk Province Hunting Department's Tiger Conflict Resolution Group, the Utyos Rehabilitation Center, WWF-Russia, and the Amur Tiger Center.

Since the beginning of 2017, three other tigers have been rehabilitated and released through these partners' work. Two tiger cubs have also been rescued and are currently being rehabilitated. 